

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

May 10, 2021

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The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

Thank you for your receptiveness to addressing the challenges that veterans in Eastern Washington continue to face as a result of the new Cerner electronic health record (EHR) system. Your decision to call for a strategic review of the program was a welcome acknowledgement that these problems are significant and warrant immediate attention.

Unfortunately, my constituents are still frequently reporting struggles at the Mann-Grandstaff medical center. Along with prescription orders and refills, community care referrals are the greatest concern. A community care backlog of at least six months seems to have developed. If the community care referral bottleneck is not resolved quickly, it risks closing off access to an important health care option that many veterans already preferred, which has become even more vital as disruptions caused by the EHR have reduced capacity at the medical center.

The community care referral problems seem to be caused by a host of factors. The community care office at Mann-Grandstaff has long been understaffed and overworked, and I know the added stress of adapting to the new EHR has not helped the situation. Employees report that orders and referrals of various types routinely fall through the cracks, meaning they get routed to unexpected parts of the Cerner system or simply are not processed. Generally, employees report that Cerner's referral management function is not efficient or user friendly, and there is no consistency in how referrals are to be managed. I do not believe any specific training on the referral manager system was provided to most employees. The Tiger Teams highlighted these problems in dental, but they seem to exist in many other departments.

I respectfully ask that VA provide answers to the following questions as soon as possible, so the veterans I represent can have confidence that the community care backlog is being addressed.

1. How many community care appointments have been requested since October 24, 2020, when the Cerner EHR was implemented, how many of those referrals were processed successfully, and how many of those community care appointments were completed?

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2. How many community care referrals are outstanding at Mann-Grandstaff now?
3. How many days, on average, does it take to schedule a community care appointment and what is the current average time required to close out a community care referral initiated by Mann-Grandstaff? What was the average before October 24, 2020?
4. What are the causes of the difficulties in processing community care referrals and how and when will they be resolved?
5. How many vacancies are there now in the community care office at Mann-Grandstaff? What was the optimal staffing level for the community care office prior to the Cerner transition? Does that level need a temporary adjustment to accommodate the transition? What is the expected staffing requirement following full implementation?

Thank you for your attention to this urgent situation and for your commitment to our nation's veterans. Please do not hesitate to have your staff contact Matthew Cardenas in my office, at matthew.cardenas@mail.house.gov, with any questions.

Cathy McMorris Rodgers



Member of Congress